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DOES EMILIA LOVE THE PRINCE?

In 1841, seventy years after *Emilia Galotti* appeared, Riemer published his *Mitteilungen über Goethe*. This work contains a random remark of Goethe's on Lessing's tragedy, which is as follows:

The fundamental mistake of this piece is that it is nowhere expressed that Emilia loves the Prince, but that it is merely hinted at. If that were the case (that is, if Lessing had clearly indicated that Emilia loved the Prince), we should then know why the father kills her. Her love is indeed suggested, first in the way in which she listens to the Prince and then by the way in which she afterwards rushes into the room; for if she did not love him, she would have repulsed him; finally it is also expressed, but clumsily, by her fear of the Chancellor's house. For either she is a goose to be afraid, or a loose woman. But if she loves him, she must prefer to ask for death itself, in order to escape that house.¹

Goethe was the first to suggest that Emilia loves the Prince, although the drama had been a bone of contention for the critics ever since its appearance. But no sooner did Goethe point the way than a host of critics took up the hint and wrote elaborate articles and commentaries to prove Emilia's love for the Prince. Does it not seem strange, however, that this universally known tragedy of the great master of dramatic art should have had to wait nearly three-quarters of a century for its right interpretation!

And yet, Lessing was not one of those authors who believe in hiding anything from the reader. He says in the Forty-eighth Paper of his "Hamburgische Dramaturgie":

I by no means agree with most of the writers on dramatic art that the development of a play should be hidden from the spectator. I rather think that it would not be an overrating of my powers if I set myself to write a play whose development reveals itself in the very first scenes and whose most sustained interest arises from this very circumstance. For the spectator everything must be clear.

Lessing wrote this while he was working on *Emilia Galotti*, and therefore it seems highly probable that, had he intended to portray

¹ Riemer's *Mitteilungen über Goethe*, II, 663. Translation by Professor Max Winkler in his Introduction to *Emilia Galotti*, Heath & Co., p. xx.

Emilia as being in love with the Prince, he would have done it in such a way that there would have been no room for misunderstanding, and the drama would not have had to wait for seventy years for its true meaning to be discovered. Whatever faults Lessing may have had, he was never obscure or ambiguous. Everything he wrote was always clear and to the point. Over and over again he repeats: "For the spectator everything must be clear." *Emilia Galotti* especially is his maturest dramatic production, the work of his strongest critical and creative faculties, and it is consequently one of the most carefully constructed plays in the whole range of modern literature. Lessing worked upon it, off and on, for fifteen years and considered and reconsidered every minutest detail. "Never," one critic writes, "was such a piece of dramatic algebra put on the boards as is *Emilia Galotti*. Every line, almost every word, betrays calculation on the part of the author."¹ Lessing wrote it with the direct intention of giving a model drama to the German people and of exemplifying the high standards which he had established in his critical writings, especially in his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*. Accordingly, when Goethe complains that the fundamental mistake of the piece is that it is nowhere expressed that Emilia loves the Prince, it must be said that Lessing could hardly be blamed for not expressing what was not felt.

In a letter to his brother, Lessing himself indirectly characterized Emilia. "The maidenly heroines and philosophers," he said, "are not at all to my taste. . . . I know of no higher virtues in an unmarried girl than piety and obedience."² It is these virtues of piety and obedience that are the most essential traits of her character. They are fully manifest in her first appearance upon the stage. She shows herself as possessing a childlike pious heart, being intensely religious, and loving her parents with the deepest affection.

Emilia is the daughter of higher middle-class parents. "By nature she takes after her father rather than her mother, and it is he who had the greatest influence upon the development of her moral character. It was he who inculcated into her those severe lessons of virtue, that distrust of things worldly and that proud disdain for

¹ C. von Klenze, *Modern Language Notes*, IX (1894), 427.

² *Lessing's Works*, Hempel ed., xxi, 482-83.

life itself when honor is at stake, which determine her action in the most tragic moments of her life.”¹ Of her almost divine beauty we get ample evidence in the scene between the Prince and the painter, Conti. Up to her early womanhood she lives in the simplicity and retirement of country life. To further her education she goes with her mother to the capital town. Her father, however, has an instinctive dislike for the city life and the court, where servility, flattery, and licentiousness prevail.

In the capital Emilia meets Count Appiani, a man of sterling character, and they become engaged. One evening at a gathering at the house of Chancellor Grimaldi she also meets the reigning Prince, a thoroughly unscrupulous and depraved tyrant, a splendid example of those scourges with which many of the smaller states of Germany were afflicted in the eighteenth century. He falls in love with her, and from the opening scenes we learn that he soon forgets his former mistress, and that he is thinking only of how to obtain Emilia. And so on her wedding day, while praying at church, she hears someone confessing love to her. Turning round she finds that it is the Prince himself. “Mute, trembling, and abashed, she stood before me,” the Prince tells Marinelli, “like a criminal who hears the judge’s fatal sentence. Her terror was infectious. I trembled also and concluded by imploring her forgiveness.”² Frightened and indignant she flees from church as if pursued by furies. She rushes into her mother’s arms exclaiming: “Heaven be praised! I am now in safety.” Her mother, too, is frightened looking at her. “What has happened to you, my daughter? And you look so wildly round, and tremble in every limb.” With difficulty Emilia tells her mother of her experience at church. And then,

As I turned, as I beheld him—

Claudia: Whom, my child?

Emilia: Guess, mother, guess! I thought I should sink into the earth. It was he himself.

Claudia: Who, himself?

Emilia: The Prince.³

¹ Max Winkler, Introduction to *Emilia Galotti*, Heath & Co., p. xx.

² *Emilia Galotti*, III, iii.

³ *Ibid.*, II, vi.

And it is this fear and confusion of Emilia that is interpreted into love for the Prince! It is especially this "he himself" that the critics take as proof that she has the Prince constantly in mind because she loves him. But why not take a simple thing simply? Is it not more natural that her fear and confusion are due to her extreme youth and inexperience, to the suddenness of it all, to the religious and moral shock that she, the affianced of another, should on her wedding day be obliged to listen to a sinful confession of licentious love from the lips of no less a person than the Prince himself, the despotic ruler of the land, the hated and despised enemy of both her father and her lover? Why not take the Prince's own words of her attitude toward his love professions? "With all my flattery, with all my entreaties I could not extract one word from her. Mute, trembling, and abashed, she stood before me like a criminal who hears the judge's fatal sentence." By "he himself" she does not mean the Prince as her lover, but the Prince she met at the gay and frivolous house of the Chancellor, the depraved, autocratic tyrant who does what he pleases. Such a man could not inspire anything but contempt in a woman like Emilia. She must have realized the Prince's intention to make her but another of his mistresses.¹

Emilia is determined to tell Appiani everything that happened in the church. "The Count must know everything. To him I must tell all." But her mother advises her not to, nay, pleads with her. And Emilia is not "almost glad to follow her mother's advice," as Professor Max Winkler and others would have us believe, but only very reluctantly she obeys her mother because it is her mother's wish. "You know, dear mother, how willingly I ever submit to your superior judgment. . . . And yet I would rather not conceal anything from him." "Weakness! Fond weakness!" her mother exclaims. "No, on no account, my daughter! Tell him nothing.

¹ Cf. Marinelli's remarks regarding the approaching marriage of Emilia and Count Appiani. "A girl without fortune or rank has managed to catch him in her snares. . . . He will retire with his spouse to his native valleys of Piedmont and indulge himself in hunting chamois or training marmots upon the Alps. What can he do better? Here his prospects are blighted by the connection he has formed. The first circles are closed against him." I, vi. Countess Orsina tells Emilia's father: "I am Orsina, the deluded, forsaken Orsina—perhaps forsaken only for your daughter. But how is she to blame? Soon she also will be forsaken; then another, another, and another." IV, viii. At the very time the Prince is infatuated with Emilia, arrangements are being made for his approaching marriage with the Princess of Massa.

Let him observe nothing." And finally Emilia consents. "Well, then, I submit. I have no will, dear mother, opposed to yours."¹ Thus it is against the voice of her own heart that she agrees not to tell Appiani of her experience at the church.

Her mother tells her furthermore that she has taken the whole matter altogether too seriously, that the Prince's so-called love protestations are nothing but mere gallantries. "The Prince is a gallant," she tells her, "and you are too little used to the unmeaning language of gallantry. And thus in your mind a civility becomes an emotion—a compliment, a declaration—an idea, a wish—a wish, a design. A mere nothing, in this language, sounds like everything, while everything sounds like nothing." To which Emilia joyfully exclaims: "Oh, dear mother, I must have been completely ridiculous with my terror! Now my good Appiani shall know nothing of it. He might, perhaps, think me more vain than virtuous."²

Now, if Emilia had the slightest love for the Prince, she would not have been made so happy by her mother's assurances that the Prince was not serious, that his utterances to her were mere gallantries signifying nothing. On the contrary, according to all laws of human nature, such assurances would have disappointed her painfully. It is hard to believe that Lessing could be guilty of overlooking such an essential trait of human nature. This alone should be complete and convincing proof that Emilia does not love the Prince, and that any such supposition is entirely contrary to the author's conception of the play and the character of Emilia.

After the attack by the bandits Emilia is taken to the Prince's summer place. As soon as she learns where she is, the whole bitter truth dawns upon her. "That the Count is dead! And why is he dead! Why!"³ Her father tells her that he is not permitted to take her with him, and that she will be taken by the Prince to the house of the Chancellor Grimaldi. But to that house she will not go. She is no longer the weak child listening to her mother's advice against her own inclinations. She will no longer compromise. The day's experience has changed the inexperienced, timid young girl into a strong and determined woman. She will rather die than remain with the Prince or go to Chancellor Grimaldi's house. Thus her mother

¹ *Emilia Galotti*, II, vi.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, V, vii.

aptly says of her: "She is the most timid, yet the most resolute of her sex; incapable of mastering her first impressions, but upon the least reflection she is calm and prepared for everything."¹

This determination to die rather than to go to the Chancellor's house convinces her father that she is absolutely innocent. It will be remembered that his confidence was somewhat shaken by Countess Orsina. He is now again convinced that her innocence is safe and above all force. "But not above all seduction," she replies.

Force! Force! What is force? Who may not defy force? What you call force is nothing. Seduction is the only real force. I have blood, my father, as youthful and as warm as any other girl. My senses too are senses. I will answer for nothing. I will guarantee nothing. I know the house of Grimaldi. It is a house of revelry. One hour spent in that house under the protection of my mother, and there arose in my soul a tumult which all the rigid discipline of religion could not easily quell in whole weeks. Religion! and what religion? To avoid no worse snares thousands have leapt into the waves and now are saints. Give me the dagger, then, my father, give it to me.²

It is Emilia's fear of the Chancellor's house that is also cited by the critics from Goethe down to the present as supreme proof that she loves the Prince. First the critics take for granted her love for the Prince to explain this passage; then they use the passage to prove her love for the Prince. Such arguing in a circle has no value.³

Emilia is afraid of the Chancellor's house not because she loves the Prince, but because "it is the house of revelry." It was in that house that she first came into contact with the gay and frivolous world which conflicted so strongly with her moral and religious principles, and it cost her a severe effort to overcome its seductive influence. After what has happened this day, to go back to that house seems to her nothing less than the loss of her salvation. It is this fear that animates her soul, and not any love for the Prince. "To avoid no worse snares thousands have leapt into the waves, and now

¹ *Emilia Galotti*, IV, viii.

² *Ibid.*, V, vii.

³ Cf. Kuno Fischer, *Lessing als Reformator der deutschen Literatur* (Stuttgart, 1881), p. 210. Fischer, Düntzer, and Stahr do not believe that Emilia loves the Prince.

are saints." In her voluntary death, alone, she sees the possibility of escaping from eternal damnation, and hence it becomes for her a religious duty.

Another argument used by the critics to prove Emilia's love for the Prince is Lessing's conception of tragic characters. In his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, Lessing accords with Aristotle's dramatic theory that the tragedy must rouse in us pity and fear, and for that reason the hero or heroine must be neither a faultless character nor a thorough villain. In the Eighty-second Paper of the *Dramaturgie*, he writes: "The wholly unmerited misfortune of a virtuous man, according to Aristotle, is not fit material for a tragedy, because it is terrible." And again, "A man may be very good and yet have more than one weak point, commit more than one mistake through which he throws himself into immeasurable misfortune which excites our pity and sorrow, but which is not in the least horrible, because it is the natural result of his mistake." And emphatically he repeats the statement, "We must not let any perfect man suffer in a tragedy without any fault on his part, for this is too terrible." This required weakness or fault the critics point out to be in Emilia's case her love for the Prince.

Of course, Emilia has her weakness or fault as required by Lessing's theory of tragic characters. But it is not her love for the Prince. It is the fact that she allowed herself, against her own feelings, to be influenced by her mother not to tell Appiani of the meeting with the Prince in the church. If she had told everything to Appiani, as she wished to do, Marinelli's plan would have failed in the beginning. The scene between her and Appiani follows right after the church scene and immediately precedes the one in which the intriguing Marinelli delivers to Appiani the Prince's proposal to go at once as an ambassador to the court of Massa and make final arrangements for the marriage of the Prince with the Princess of Massa. This arrangement of scenes was not the result of mere chance; it is more likely that it was carefully calculated to serve a definite purpose in the play. It was Emilia's only opportunity of telling Appiani of her meeting the Prince in the church. Count Appiani would have answered the Prince's proposal differently, had he known of the

latter's designs on Emilia. By listening to her mother rather than to the dictates of her own heart, Emilia missed the opportunity of telling Appiani what he should have known. As a result, the unsuspecting Count is assassinated, and Emilia is in the hands of the Prince and Marinelli. It is this failure of Emilia to tell Appiani of her experience at the church that fulfils Lessing's theory of tragic guilt. Emilia's love for the Prince would be more than a weakness or fault. It would make her an accomplice of the Prince, and she would deserve the suspicion of Countess Orsina that she was not violently abducted and that the attack was prearranged with Emilia's knowledge.

Accepting Goethe's dictum that Emilia loves the Prince, the critics must, to be consistent, proceed to misinterpret the other characters of the play. Instead of admitting that the Prince is an unscrupulous and thoroughly depraved tyrant, surrounded by flattering parasites, knowing no desire but to give himself to sensual passion and enjoyment, they tell us that he is an accomplished and handsome young man and of a very attractive personality, just the kind that Emilia would fall in love with. However, this is not the Prince as Lessing portrayed him.

Count Appiani, on the other hand, is characterized by the critics as a brooding and sentimental individual, just the kind that Emilia would not fall in love with. Accordingly, Professor Max Winkler tells us: "The relation between Appiani and Emilia is not based upon deep passion. They are merely good friends." And again: "What a contrast there is between the brilliant personality of the Prince and that of Appiani! From the latter she probably never heard any such words of passion as the Prince utters in the church and in Dosalo, for even on his marriage day Appiani approaches his bride with a strange melancholy and a foreboding of evil."¹ But does not Professor Winkler ignore the real character of Appiani? Even the Prince, Appiani's mortal foe, must say of him that he is "a very worthy young man, a handsome man, a rich man, and an honorable man."² Emilia's father, himself a man of immaculate honor, considers the approaching

¹ Professor Max Winkler, Introduction to *Emilia Galotti*, Heath & Co., p. xxxiii.

² I, vi.

marriage of his daughter with Appiani as the height of happiness. "I can hardly await the time," he says, "when I shall call this worthy young man my son. Everything about him delights me."¹ Emilia herself calls him "my good Appiani" and in the only scene between her and the Count she shows how deeply she does love him.

It is true that Appiani "approaches his bride on the marriage day with a strange melancholy and foreboding of evil." But that is the only time. Professor Winkler's *even* implies the opposite, which is not true. Appiani himself wonders why he feels so downcast on this of all the days of his life. He cannot explain the reason. Then, too, Emilia's dreams about the pearls, which she says signify tears, intensify his melancholy mood and strange premonition of evil. But Appiani's forebodings and Emilia's dreams were designed by the author to prepare us for the tragedy that soon overtakes them both, and not to characterize Appiani as a melancholy and gloomy person. With just as much justice one might speak of Shakespeare's Desdemona as a "melancholy person with a strange foreboding of evil" because she feels like singing the sad Willow Song on the fateful evening before she is strangled.² The critics misinterpret Appiani's character. They paint him in the darkest colors and the Prince in the brightest—and all to make it plausible that Emilia loves the Prince.

But to return to Emilia. Against her own will she allowed herself to be persuaded not to tell Appiani of her meeting the Prince in the church. That is her weakness or fault.³ When she finds herself in the Prince's summer place, she realizes her fault. Hence the tragic words: "That the Count is dead! And why is he dead! Why!"

¹ II, iv.

² Dreams and premonitions are commonly used by dramatists to foreshadow events and to create the proper atmosphere in the play. Other examples from Shakespeare are Antonio's unusual sadness in the opening of *The Merchant of Venice*, Clarence' and Stanley's dreams in *Richard III*, Juliet's words in *Romeo and Juliet*:

"I have no joy of this contract to-night;
It is too rash, too unadvis'd, too sudden,
Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be
Ere one can say it lightens."—II, ii, 117-20,

and many others.

³ A somewhat similar fault or weakness constitutes the tragic guilt of Shakespeare's Desdemona. I mean when she fails to tell Othello that she lost the handkerchief.

Accordingly, the whole question centers around this one point: Was Emilia's silence due to her weakness in obeying her mother's wish rather than the dictates of her own heart, or was it due to a secret, sinful passion for the Prince? It has been pointed out above how reluctantly she obeyed her mother's advice, and that her silence, therefore, was not due to any love for the Prince. Furthermore, Emilia would not have been made happy by her mother's assurances that the Prince was not serious, and that his so-called love professions were but mere gallantries, if she had loved the Prince.

It is also noteworthy that out of the forty-three scenes in the play Emilia appears in only four and not in a single monologue. There is nothing hidden in her nature that needs to be revealed in a monologue, and least of all a secret, sinful passion for the Prince. Goethe's random remark should not have been taken, in this case, as unimpeachable wisdom and expanded into a commentary on the tragedy. Goethe's great reputation by no means rests upon his critical remarks. Not a single one of his literary criticisms stands out pre-eminently. Most of them have merely an extrinsic value due to the fact that Goethe wrote them. Friedrich Schlegel, in his review of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, says of Goethe as a literary critic: "He revels too much in the enjoyment of his own perfectly beautiful soul to be able to explain with the faithful impartiality of an unassuming investigator the works of another poet." But merely because Goethe, in his old age, made that remark concerning Emilia's character, it was taken up by the critics as a divine oracle and accepted as final. Nearly all the subsequent interpretations of the play are amplifications of one sort or another of Goethe's random and misleading remark.

As already mentioned, Lessing himself said in regard to Emilia: "I know of no higher virtues in a young unmarried girl than piety and obedience." It is these virtues that predominate in her and are the cause of both her weakness and her strength. If she had been a little less obedient, she would not have listened to her mother's advice. Again, the child who at first has no will but her mother's is at last able to make the stronger will of her father submit to hers. She will not go to the Chancellor's house. One hour spent there

made her feel its seductive influence, and it required the severest religious discipline to overcome that influence. If she had been a little less pious, she would not have been so scrupulous. But then she would not have been Emilia as Lessing portrayed her in the play.

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